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HEALTH

A vaccine scientist's discredited claims have bolstered a movement of misinformation



By Timothy Bella

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Robert Malone speaks during a rally after a D.C. march opposing coronavirus mandates on Jan. 23. (Tom Brenner/Reuters)



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As Robert Malone stood on the steps of the Lincoln Memorial before thousands of [anti-vaccine and anti-mandate demonstrators](#) Sunday, the medical doctor and infectious-disease researcher repeated the falsehoods that have garnered him legions of followers.

“Regarding the genetic covid vaccines, the science is settled,” he said in a 15-minute speech that referenced the Rev. Martin Luther King Jr. and John F. Kennedy. “They are not working.”

The [misinformation](#) came two days after the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention released its first studies based on real-world data showing that [coronavirus](#) vaccines provide strong protection against hospitalization from the rapidly spreading omicron variant.

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Malone, who [said](#) the coronavirus “should never have been politicized,” was met with roaring applause.

“You tell ‘em, doc!” one man shouted.



Thousands of people protesting coronavirus vaccine mandates marched from the Washington Monument to the Lincoln Memorial on Jan. 23. (Video: Reuters)

Malone, who bills himself as having played a key role in the creation of mRNA vaccines, has emerged as one of the most controversial voices of the movement against coronavirus vaccines and health mandates. His claims and suggestions have been discredited and denounced by medical professionals as not only wrong, but also dangerous. Twitter barred him for violating the platform’s coronavirus misinformation policy, but he has found platforms elsewhere — recently appearing on an episode of Joe Rogan’s wildly popular podcast, which averages 11 million listeners per episode.

That show — along with guest spots on Fox News programming hosted by Tucker Carlson and Laura Ingraham — has thrust the 62-year-old into the limelight at a crucial time of the pandemic, when unvaccinated patients continue to fill ICU wards.

Critics say Malone’s story highlights the peril of offering an enormous platform to someone who once complained about being “written out of history” and is now finding celebrity.

“There is a huge market for misinformation,” said Jay Van Bavel, an assistant professor of psychology and neural science at New York University who has studied conspiracy theories and misinformation. “The way he’s framed in the conspiracy-theory world is that he’s a courageous whistleblower rather than someone who is spreading misinformation — and it’s only enhancing his profile.”

A former colleague of Malone’s, who spoke on the condition of anonymity to speak candidly without fear of recrimination, said that while Malone is “a brilliant scientist who has a tremendous amount of experience and knowledge about vaccines,” there is reason to be concerned about how his newfound stardom could be a public health risk.

“I don’t feel what he’s doing and saying is in the right context or necessarily very helpful,” the former co-worker said. “Everyone is

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entitled to their opinion, but there's a risk we're all facing when he's not accurately representing the information."

[Anti-vaccine activists march in D.C. — a city that mandates covid vaccines — to protest mandates]

Malone had a following before his "Joe Rogan Experience" interview that was released Dec. 31 — but that show introduced him to an even wider audience. On it, he promoted an unfounded theory called "mass-formation psychosis," telling Rogan that a "third of the population [is] basically being hypnotized" into believing what the mainstream media and Anthony S. Fauci, the nation's top infectious-disease expert and chief medical adviser to President Biden, report on the vaccines. Malone went on to compare the country's pandemic policies to Nazi Germany.

His remarks drew massive attention — and outrage.

"To claim that choosing not to get a vaccine and not being able to go to a movie theater is in any way comparable to Jewish people being targeted and murdered, it blows my mind," said Jonathan Laxton, an assistant professor of medicine at the University of Manitoba who signed [a letter](#) from 270 medical professionals to Spotify this month demanding that the company do more to prevent the spread of false covid-19 information. "He devalued the impact of the Holocaust."

Van Bavel added: "He used a pseudoscience term and millions of people downloaded the episode — and it took on a life of its own, even though there is no evidence supporting it."

[Doctors call out Spotify for letting Joe Rogan spread 'false and societally harmful' covid-19 claims]

Malone declined to be interviewed for this story, saying he would "not be able to support" The Washington Post's request. He did not provide further explanation. Neither Rogan's publicist nor a Spotify spokesperson immediately replied to requests for comment. A Fox News spokesperson declined to comment.

One person who has stood by Malone: Robert F. Kennedy Jr., a longtime anti-vaccine activist who also [spoke](#) at Sunday's march. In a statement to The Post, Kennedy described media reports on Malone promoting misinformation as a "euphemism for any assertion that departs from government orthodoxies [whether] true or not."

"In my experience, Malone's statements are measured and scrupulously sourced," he said. "I know him well enough to know that he would quickly and publicly correct any statement shown to be untrue."

Colleagues and critics alike have acknowledged Malone's impressive credentials in a career spanning more than three decades. Among those accomplishments was serving as CEO and founder of a company contracted by the U.S. government in 2016 to assist in the development of a treatment for the Zika virus. But his former co-worker told The Post that he is also known for his headstrong demeanor, often unwilling to change his stance on a position over the years, even if the science said

“Like anything else in life, it can be a huge strength,” the former colleague said, “but that can also create blind spots.”



Malone in his barn on July 22, 2020, in Madison, Va. (Steve Helber/Associated Press)

Malone has long billed himself as the inventor of mRNA vaccines, but the history behind the development is more complicated. When he was a graduate student in biology at the Salk Institute for Biological Studies in San Diego in the late 1980s, Malone injected DNA and RNA into mice cells. He co-wrote papers in 1989 and 1990 that said such an injection of fatty droplets into a living organism could bring about new proteins — and possibly “provide alternative approaches to vaccine development” for human cells, researchers wrote.

[Nature magazine](#) reported that Malone’s experiments drew on the work of other researchers, and dozens of companies and academic labs would soon formulate the building blocks for mRNA vaccines. Malone’s work offered some of the steppingstones toward decades of innovations from hundreds of researchers that would eventually give way to the mRNA-based coronavirus vaccine administered to millions of people worldwide, according to Nature.

Malone has been public about saying his early work on mRNA vaccines has been overlooked in favor of those who have been declared mRNA pioneers for working on later advancements. Even though two of his papers were the first reference in a [2019 paper](#) about the history of mRNA vaccines, Malone told Nature, “I’ve been written out of history.”

[\[Stressed hospitals are asking workers with covid to return — even if they may be infectious\]](#)

One of those people who has received recognition for work in mRNA vaccines is biochemist Katalin Karikó, who the [New York Times](#) said was among the many who “helped shield the world from the coronavirus.” Karikó shared with [the Atlantic](#) an email Malone sent her that accused the biochemist of inflating her accomplishments: “This is not going to end well.” Malone told the magazine in August that the message was not meant as a threat. Karikó declined to comment.

When Malone said he was infected with the coronavirus in February 2020, he said he turned to famotidine, the main ingredient in the over-the-counter heartburn medicine Pepcid, as a treatment. Malone, who at the time was the chief medical officer for the Florida-based pharmaceutical company Alchem Laboratories, took to his LinkedIn page to report how he had figured out the appropriate dose and became “the first to take the drug to treat my own case.”

The Trump administration funded a \$21 million study of famotidine in April 2020 that was to be done by Alchem and Northwell Health, a New York health-care provider, despite a lack of data or published studies showing it could be effective against the virus. Malone resigned from Alchem the week the company got the contract, complaining to the [Associated Press](#) of a difficult work environment. The study eventually fizzled out amid allegations of conflicts of interest and scientific misconduct. Officials with Alchem and Northwell declined to comment.

Malone said he hoped getting vaccinated would alleviate the long-term symptoms he suffered. But he told the Atlantic that the Moderna injections made his symptoms worse, echoing similar claims from mandate opponents such as musician [Eric Clapton](#). Since then, Malone’s objections surrounding the Pfizer-BioNTech and Moderna vaccines have been mostly about the expedited approval process, as well as the government’s system to track adverse reactions from those who have been vaccinated.

[\[Fact Checker: The false claim that the fully approved Pfizer vaccine lacks liability protection\]](#)

He published his criticisms of the vaccines and mandates on Twitter, building a following of more than 440,000 users — and a reach that extended far beyond the platform. At an Ohio school board meeting in August, a man who introduced himself as a doctor shared several misleading claims about the vaccines, including that Malone had said no one should ever take the vaccines.

While skeptical of the shots, Malone told the [AP](#) in August that he has never stated that coronavirus vaccines should not be administered. His comments have shifted against vaccines more in recent months. Malone argued Sunday that the omicron variant “is destroying the approved narrative that the vaccines are safe and effective,” ignoring last week’s CDC notice that vaccine boosters [were preventing serious illness](#) from the omicron variant of the coronavirus, which causes the disease covid-19. He also discouraged people from getting vaccinated and pushed instead for natural immunity, which, as emergency physician Leana S. Wen [wrote](#) for The Post in August, is dangerous.

[\[What to know about the omicron variant\]](#)

It didn’t stop there. A Canadian study suggesting a high rate of heart inflammation after people were given coronavirus vaccines was [retracted](#) by the study’s authors in September because of a significant mathematical error, the Canadian Broadcasting Corp. reported. Despite the major inaccuracy, screenshots of the preprint study spread among

the anti-vaccine community. Among those who shared it was Malone, who got a huge response to the tweet but did not take it down, even though many noted that the study had been retracted.

Timothy Caulfield, the Canada research chair in health law and policy at the University of Alberta, said Malone injecting himself into a conversation with the kind of credentials he has, and “cherry-picking rotten data,” was “a worst-case scenario.”

“You have this individual who has all these credentials and this history in the biomedical world, so that looks impressive. And he’s referencing a study that, on the face of it, may look impressive. But you don’t know that the study is fraudulent,” Caulfield said, adding that Malone has “weaponized bad research.”

In November, Malone shared a deceptive video to his Twitter followers that falsely linked athlete deaths to coronavirus shots. The video suggested that coronavirus vaccination killed Jake West, a 17-year-old Indiana high school football player who died of sudden cardiac arrest. But the vaccine played no role in West’s death. The teen died of an undiagnosed heart condition in 2013.

Malone tweeted the video with three words about vaccination: “Safe and effective?” He deleted the tweet about the same time he received a cease-and-desist letter from West’s family, according to the [AP](#), and later noted to his followers that he didn’t know the video had been “doctored.”

Twitter permanently suspended him in December; the next day, Rogan published his interview with Malone that pushed the vaccine scientist to stardom.

Rogan’s episode drew immediate backlash, but Malone found support from Rep. Troy E. Nehls (R-Tex.), who [entered](#) a full transcript of the interview into the Congressional Record. At Sunday’s march, numerous Malone followers were in the audience, including Rachel Gillert, who carried a sign reading, “Do you have mass-formation psychosis?”

“It seems like a lot of people saw his side of this issue for the first time when he did his interview with Joe Rogan,” said Gillert, 31, of Richmond. “It definitely seems like he’s made a big impact.”

Critics such as Laxton are frustrated with how Malone has been embraced as a credible ally against vaccines and mandates: “He’s put himself exactly where he wants to be. I don’t think you’re going to dissuade too many people from not following him.”

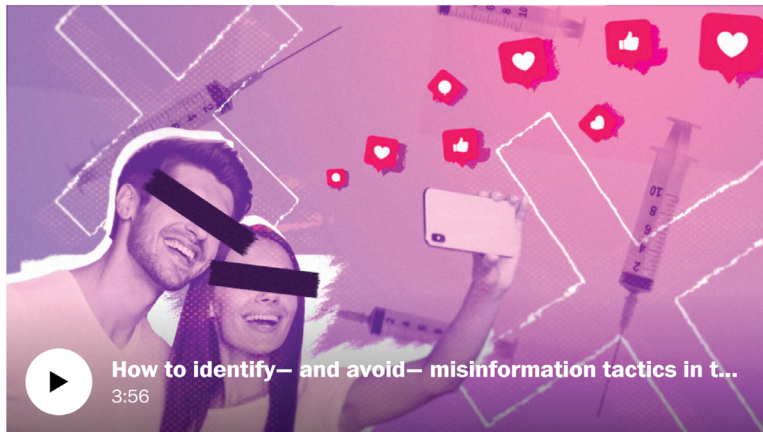
Daniel Kotzin, 52, who flew in from Denver with his two young children to attend Sunday’s march, said Malone’s interview with Rogan, as well as his credentials, have “galvanized” parents who are against vaccinating their children.

“Dr. Malone has risked his reputation and career to stand up for what’s right and true,” he said, adding that he doesn’t believe Malone was promoting misinformation. “Everything he does is done in the best

After Malone concluded his speech by urging parents to not comply with coronavirus mandates, he received one of the largest ovations of the day, and many yelled, “Thank you!”

With his increased profile in recent weeks, some are calling on him to take a step back and reflect on the damage his misinformation is causing.

“Given the polarization that exists in our world, I don’t think what he’s doing is helping,” said Malone’s former colleague. “That’s what I would ask him right now: ‘Do you think this is helping?’”



Wellness influencers’ nature-based approach to health may steer followers away from factual information. Lydia Greene broke out of that echo chamber. (Video: Blair Guild, Allie Caren/The Washington Post)

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